

Low-cost jets could revolutionize travel

Before on-demand air taxis can be a reality, smaller airports will need to upgrade runways and equipment, and "rules of the road" will need to be created.

BY MOLLY MCMILLIN
The Wichita Eagle

There's a new generation of aviation innovators working to develop a new class of lower-cost jets that could change U.S. air travel.

They want to help create affordable, on-demand flight service using small jets between small airports around the country -- including those in Kansas.

Call them the Yellow Cabs of the sky.

Used as air taxis, the jets would ferry travelers to the thousands of public-use airports not now used by the major airlines. Wichita's Jabara Airport might be such a place; the airports in smaller Kansas cities such as Manhattan, Garden City or Hays might be, also.

An air taxi system could help relieve congestion on the highways and at traditional hub-and-spoke commercial airports.

Regional air taxi services will require a new class of jets that cost less to buy and to operate than today's traditional business jets.

One new, much-written-about light jet now under development in Albuquerque, the Eclipse 500, carries a price tag of around \$1 million - far less than traditional business jets now on the market.

Wichita's Cessna Aircraft also is developing a light jet, the Citation Mustang, at a cost of under \$2.5 million, about half the cost of its next-lowest-priced jet.

A system of air taxis could create a new market for business jet manufacturers.

NASA, which proposed the idea of an air taxi system it calls the Small Aircraft Transportation System, recently initiated a five-year, \$69 million research plan to prove the concept will work.

"Such a system promises improved safety, efficiency, reliability and affordability," NASA officials say.

Eclipse Aviation founder Vern Raburn thinks it's only a matter of time before the concept becomes reality.

Raburn thinks the service will be in place in many regions across the country in the next five to seven years.

"A single person or a small group of people should be able to reserve an airplane to take them from whatever airport they're at to wherever they want to go," he said.

The air taxi concept differs from traditional charter flights. For one, the planes' lower costs will make jet travel affordable to a larger number of people.

And unlike traditional charter services, air taxi passengers would pay only for the time they are in the plane and not for the cost of the empty plane's return to the airport home, Raburn said.

The cost of a one-hour flight across Kansas, Raburn estimates, would likely run from \$500 to \$600. That means a 45-minute flight from Topeka to Garden City could cost three people sharing the flight less than \$200 per person, he said.

An air taxi system would allow people to fly to a meeting and return in the same day, Raburn said.

For an air taxi service system to launch, some on-ground developments must occur:

Many smaller airports must add or upgrade lighting, approaches, navigational equipment, terminals, hangars and parking.

Air traffic control systems at larger airports must be upgraded and prepared for the slower aircraft as they travel along their routes.

Any air taxi system must allow the pilots to function in evolving complex airspace, NASA said.

"We have to establish the rules of the road," said NASA spokeswoman Kathy Barnstorff.

NASA's grant will be used to invest in some of those capabilities.

Eclipse and Cessna are not the only companies developing lower-cost jets. Many other companies -- some small or start-up companies -- have entered the light-jet market.

Safire Aircraft Co. in Miami is building a \$1.4 million jet to carry four passengers. Adam Aircraft in Englewood, Colo., is developing a \$2 million jet. Others, including Cirrus Design, Diamond Aircraft, Lancair and Sino Swearingen may also enter the market.

The companies are planning more traditional roles for the jets. The planes also will be marketed to individuals or businesses who will use them for leisure or business travel.

So will we soon be running out to the airport to hail a plane?

Data shows "this should and could happen," Rathburn said.

The risk is in whether the market will accept the concept.

"Obviously, the volumes need to be there; the services need to be there," said General Aviation Manufacturers Association president Ed Bolen. "We'll wait to see."

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